

## **The University of Utah's Integrated Core** *A Case Study from a "Commuter Campus"*

**Karen Paisley**  
**Callie Spencer**  
**Mary Sarah Wells**  
**Keri Schwab**  
University of Utah

### **Abstract**

This paper describes the Integrated Core (IC), the University of Utah's version of integrated curricula. We begin with a rationale for the IC, providing a background on the unique student demographics, and University-wide requirements that propelled our design. Our IC focuses specifically on active living, sustainability, and social justice as target outcomes of parks, recreation, and tourism services and experiences. This rationale is followed by an outline of both the structure and implementation of the IC, including a discussion of sample assignments (incorporating both experiential learning and community engagement). Following a discussion of feedback after two years of delivering the IC, relaying benefits as well as challenges, we end with suggestions for future improvements.

**KEYWORDS:** *Active living, integrated curricula, community-engaged learning, learning communities, social justice, sustainability*

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Karen Paisley is an associate professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism and the associate dean of the College of Health at the University of Utah. Callie Spencer is a PhD candidate at the University of Utah. Mary Sara Wells is an assistant professor at the University of Utah. Keri Schwab was an assistant professor (lecturer) at the University of Utah at the time of writing, but has since transitioned to assistant professor at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen Paisley, Karen.Paisley@health.utah.edu

## **Rationale for the Innovation**

In the summer and fall of 2010, faculty at the University of Utah undertook a thorough investigation of the notion of integrated curricula. Noting the success experienced by the pioneers at the University of Georgia, and the subsequent model at Clemson University, we interviewed the faculty involved at those institutions. In addition, to identify “lessons learned” from those who had gone before us, we conducted focus groups with students at both of those institutions. We developed a proposal based on those data, incorporating modifications to suit our unique student body. In general terms, and based on the culture of the state, undergraduate students at the University of Utah tend to work full time (only 43% graduate within four years), tend to live off campus (only 9% of students live on campus), are comparatively older than the national average (average age at the University of Utah is 24, with 32% over 25), and many are married with young children. In addition, Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (PRT) is, essentially, a “discovery” major at Utah, meaning that students are typically only in our program for two years (after they have completed general education requirements or have transferred in to the university).

We believe an integrated curriculum (called the Integrated Core (IC) at Utah) serves three specific needs for our unique student population (a more general rationale for this approach has been provided in previous papers in this issue). First, it allows us to focus and capitalize on the rich history of recreation as a social service (so that students understand the *why* of what they are learning and doing). Second, it reduces redundancy and increases connections across courses and allows for immediate and community-based, experiential application of material. Finally, it meets the needs of our students’ schedules and multiple commitments while seeking to develop a connected cohort of students on a commuter campus.

## **Integrated Core: Overview**

Philosophically, the IC emphasizes the unique ability of PRT, as an applied discipline, to impact a number of timely and relevant social issues. Specifically, and perhaps, most obviously, PRT is based on and encourages active living, which immediately addresses both the health and obesity crises plaguing the United States as well as the “graying” of the population as the numbers of retirees increases. Issues of climate change and environmental impact clearly highlight the need for *sustainable* practices on both business and personal levels. Toward this end, these attitudes and behaviors were modeled and reinforced through the IC as we relied on the Utah Transit Authority and mass transit for most of our experiential opportunities. Finally, the need for *social justice* becomes increasingly apparent as issues of immigration, poverty, and diversity are ubiquitous. Dating back to Hull House, recreation has a long history as a human and social service. While there are numerous other potential beneficial outcomes of PRT, we chose to focus on these three: active living, sustainability, and social justice (Paisley, 2011). Enhancing students’ internalization of their potential impact in these arenas, ideally, creates a force for social change.

Second, our students had often expressed frustration around redundancy of material and a lack of coherence across core courses. The IC combines 14 credit hours (five separate courses): 3100: Foundations of PRT; 3101: Professional Preparation in

PRT; 3310: Leisure Behavior and Human Diversity; 3320: Programming and Leadership in PRT; and 3780: Program and Service Evaluation in PRT. Consistent meetings and communication allow the instructional team to facilitate immediate application of material; relate content, reduce redundancy, and facilitate progression across courses; enhance pedagogical consistency; and allow for meaningful field experiences in the community that reinforce course content and ignite curiosity. Students have opportunities, for example, to simultaneously study diverse populations and their respective needs (3310), gain insight into the breadth of opportunities to serve those populations (3100), and develop the abilities needed to communicate competence in doing so (3101). Students engage simultaneously in program and service planning and delivery (3320) and program evaluation (3780)—as opposed to facing an artificial temporal lag of one semester under our previous curriculum model.

Finally, the IC was designed to respect students' schedules and multiple commitments. The predictable meeting pattern accommodated students' schedules by reducing sporadic, out-of-class obligations. They did not need to schedule time off from work or away from their families for experiential opportunities or group projects. Time was dedicated to these in class as such experiences are central to the applied nature of our discipline and are central to our national accreditation standards. Beyond that, researchers have noted that linking academic and social experiences facilitates authentic learning whereby students "actively construct and assimilate knowledge throughout a reciprocal process" (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 117). Thus, the IC has enhanced the "cohort effect" our department has worked toward through scheduling efforts, recognizing that fostering community and social capital is crucial to our discipline as well as to our students, especially on a commuter campus.

### **Integrated Core: Implementation**

As described in previous papers, the need for buy-in and support of the entire faculty is crucial. The first step to adopting the IC model was to secure faculty buy-in. In contrast to Clemson's model (described in an earlier paper), the University of Utah serves over 350 undergraduate majors with only eight tenure-track faculty. After gaining the approval of the faculty, the largest concern was that the new format would discourage students from enrolling. This was addressed through a comprehensive advising campaign requiring the PRT Academic Advisor to mechanically add students to the IC through direct communication with registration. This process ensured that students were fully informed and aware of the IC's purpose and structure.

Unique from the models at UGA and Clemson, we also faced additional negotiations with University offices and committees. We had to convince the Registrar's Office that the 14 credits could and should be offered in an integrated format. The Scheduling Office was concerned about finding spaces to accommodate our requested meeting pattern (as PRT has no real classroom space at its own scheduling discretion). The Office of Financial Aid was concerned that students could maintain minimum enrollment for financial aid (if they were to fail any of the 14 credits). We also had to convince university officials that no course would lose content as a result of integration, and that all courses meeting university baccalaureate requirements would continue to do so. This required presentations to the Undergraduate Council and Diversity (DV requirement: 3310) and Quantitative Intensive (QI requirement: 3780) committees.

We also applied to have special course fees assessed to two of the courses in the IC (3100 and 3320) to fund off-campus group travel and to provide start-up funds for the special events planned by students during the IC.

Community service, specifically, was further emphasized through the university's Community Engaged Learning (CEL) designation received during our second year, for one of the courses (3320). This designation acknowledged the community-based nature of the course, the reciprocal nature of the relationship with community partners—both the students and community benefits—and acknowledged our use of reflection in related course assignments. In addition, our department received differential student credit hour reimbursement as a result of this designation, and students received a notation on their transcript that they participated in a CEL course.

Once we gained the necessary university approvals, we began the in-house planning process to determine how many and which faculty members and graduate teaching assistants (TAs) would teach the IC. In total, the IC meets for three four-hour sessions each week: once as an entire class in a lecture hall for the full time; once as an entire class for up to an hour and a half and then proceeding to structured experiential opportunities on campus or in the community; and once in small groups of 15-25 to allow for discussion, group projects, or computer lab work.

After the logistics of the meeting pattern were addressed, one of the major concerns was how learning would be assessed and, ultimately, graded. Certainly, this is a difficult issue in any course and is compounded when dealing with five courses that are being combined for 14 credit hours. The university mandated that students should receive individual grades for each of the five courses (rather than a single grade for 14 credit hours), which facilitates grade replacement should a student fail a particular dimension of the IC. We feel, however, that despite the independent grades, it is important to reinforce the integrated nature of the curriculum to students. Consequently, points earned from individual assignments are applied to multiple courses at once. This distribution is clarified to students in the course syllabus at the beginning of class.

In order to run the course efficiently and effectively, a team of three faculty members and five doctoral TAs are assigned to teach in the IC, with an additional TA assigned to handle logistics and maintenance of the Canvas grade book. The TAs are assigned to teach in the IC for the first two years of their three-year departmental contracts. During their first year, they attend every class and planning meeting and teach a small discussion section. In their second year, the TA's hours with the IC are reduced to only teaching their discussion sections and attending planning meetings, thus opening up hours to work with a graduate faculty member on writing or research.

### **Integrated Core: Sample Assignments**

As a department, we firmly believe in experiential education and base many course assignments on Dewey's (1938) ideas of experience in education and Kolb's (1983) experiential learning cycle. These ideas are central to the IC, as we want students to not only see the connections of content among courses, delivered seamlessly together, but also to tie concepts to pragmatic experiences. Therefore, most of our larger assignments were designed to facilitate movement through Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Further, we believe that, as human service professionals, we work with myriad populations every day—so, to be most effective, we need to understand (and, ultimately,

celebrate) this diversity. Assignments were crafted to facilitate understanding of these outcomes and populations via concrete experiences, critical thinking and problem solving, and reflection. Finally, we believe that communication is, arguably, the most important and frequent act in which we engage as humans. Capability or, better yet, talent in this arena often predicts professional success. As such, our assignments asked for written, oral, and occasionally suggested digital delivery (which incorporates the two), and we tried to provide as much individual support and feedback to students on their communication skills as possible.

In addition to the assignments listed below, we rely heavily on assessments of “student engagement.” Though not graded, per se, we also incorporate the Poverty Simulation (detailed in the paper describing UGA’s program) and “StarPower” ( a trademarked trading simulation) as learning activities to reinforce the social justice outcome of PRT and as exemplars of programming within our IC.

The following are sample assignments from a comprehensive assignment booklet distributed on the first day of class. We share these to provide an overview of our IC, and in hopes of sparking a conversation between faculty at colleges and universities that already deliver some sort of integrated curricula and those that are in the midst of designing new and creative ways to inspire and teach students. Please feel free to contact us with any questions, thoughts, or ideas for improvement you might have as you read these assignments. We are also happy to share a complete assignment booklet with anyone who is interested.

### **Outcome Understanding Exercises**

As mentioned earlier, we endorse three outcomes inherently relevant to PRT: active living, sustainability, and social justice. These assignments provide students opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of these three outcomes. Each outcome has its own unique assignment, and students are asked to choose two out of the three. The active living and sustainability assignments both require students to identify and adopt active or sustainable lifestyle changes, respectively, and keep a daily journal over a two-week timeframe of the behavior change. The social justice assignment involves identifying and attending an event (e.g., speaker, gathering, film, etc.) that addresses a social justice issue. All three assignments culminate in a first-person narrative reflection of the experiences in which students articulate their understanding of the concept, discuss how the event/behavior change affected their perceptions, and hypothesize broader implications of their participation in the assignments.

### **Population Appreciation Exercises**

The University of Utah’s undergraduate population is 74% white.<sup>1</sup> Beyond that, a dominant religious culture exists at the University (between 50% and 60% of students at the University of Utah self-report as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) and, similar to other environments in which one culture is dominant over others, this may limit exposure to “diversity” in its traditional senses. Therefore, we separate students into small group discussion sections focusing on particular population

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<sup>1</sup>We understand that “white,” when describing race, is capitalized according to APA guidelines. However, because we strive to teach and model social justice in our courses, it feels pedagogically inconsistent here to not mention the privileging we see in capitalizing White. We would like to see it in lowercase.

topics: religion, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status.

**Population presentations.** The small groups meet weekly and complete a number of different activities and community engagement exercises all leading toward becoming Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) about their assigned population. They demonstrate their expertise with a group “population presentation” using videos, theater, and traditional oral presentations to explain their population, issues of marginalization, and available community resources to the entire IC.

**Self as “newbie” and self as “marginalized” experiences.** One approach to understanding diversity is to engage in experiences that evoke affective and empathetic responses to prejudice and discrimination, whether those stem from being physically or otherwise “different” or just inexperienced or “new.” These assignments provide students with tangible experiences as both different and new. For the Self-as-Marginalized assignment, students attend an event of their choosing that increases their cultural worldview, perhaps as related to current course topics: religion, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, ability, or socioeconomic status. They must be an outsider to the event or experience, based on some visible marker or lifestyle choice. Next, many of our students already have jobs or have worked in the field as guides or are otherwise “pros,” thus having a honed skill set. We believe it is important, once students enter the field, that they remember what it feels like to be completely new to an activity. For the Self-as-Newbie assignment, students find a recreation/leisure activity in which they have never participated and are not familiar with the intricacies of the activity and, as a result, are challenged to expand their social and physical comfort zones. Two caveats of these assignments are that they must attend by themselves and may not divulge the purpose of their participation (to avoid the “I’m just here for a class” dismissal). They are required to actively participate for at least one hour and be respectful of the people and processes they encounter. Following the experience, they produce a first-person narrative guided by reflection questions.

### **Special Event Plan and Evaluation**

Each small discussion section, from start to finish, plans, implements, and evaluates a special event by the end of the semester. This is the largest (points) and most involved (time) assignment of the semester. It incorporates learning elements from all five courses that make up the IC. The final product of this assignment is a “Program Plan Portfolio” (generally around 100 pages in length), which details every aspect of the program. The “ownership” and community-building aspects of this assignment are immense, as students are generally proud of their events and the professionalism of their portfolios (which can be used in future job searches). The final portfolio is required to include the following elements: Mission, Vision, and Values; Needs Assessment; Goals and Objectives; Logic Model; Program Description; Marketing Plan; Financial Plan; Operation Plan; Risk Management Plan; Facilitation and Management; Evaluation; and Reflection.

## **Integrated Core: Benefits and Outcomes**

The IC has resulted in numerous benefits to the department, its students, and the community, and is spreading to the University as well. Within the department, faculty teaching in the emphasis areas in the semester following the IC (specifically within the Recreational Therapy and Adventure and Outdoor Programs emphases, the latter of which employs a “block schedule” format), have noted more cohesive incoming student groups, relieving some of the need for “team-building” activities in the introductory weeks of subsequent semesters. In addition, the department has enjoyed “conversion rates” (percentage of students in the IC actually declaring the major) of up to 96%, which has fueled enrollment in emphasis area courses.

Benefits to the students were best expressed in their words:

We learned a lot of real word application for growing, learning, working with people. Being aware and conscious of what makes working with people easier, better, and professional.

For the first time in my life, I LOVE coming to class. BECAUSE, this department and these instructors GET IT! We leave campus once a week to EXPERIENCE the real world and what is out there. We have instructors who continually call us out on our programmed mentality of ‘how long papers should be,’ ‘what it needs to entail,’ ‘how are we supposed to start and finish,’ etc. (I’m guilty) and encourage us to THINK and DO as we see fit. How many tests have we taken this semester? Exactly! ZERO. Our final is based on an event, for cryin’ out loud! It’s these types of things, big and small, which I believe school is for: To simply provide us the real life tools to succeed and encourage us to be better people.

I love the experiences we have. Each day I leave class with a different thought than I came with. Ideas I have had set (or blocked) in my mind change on occasion. And, while I don’t agree with everything everyone says (thank heavens...that would be boring), I appreciate the passion our core acts upon. Sustainability means something now to those of us who have never cared before. We care now, in large part due to our instructors and fellow classmates who understand something more. So, I thank you for my meaningfully wet hands (from a student who stopped using paper towels in order to practice sustainability).

Also, thanks for taking an interest in us as students like remembering about my outcome goal to stop smoking and mentioning it today. It helps to know that it’s not a one ear out the other kind of thing, even though you have like a 100 students. I know I am in the right place and department =).

Site visits and simulations do a good job of putting us outside our comfort some, and get us thinking about differences in others in a multitude of statues.

Clearly, students felt connected to the department, to each other, the community, the target outcomes of the IC, and even to personal goals.

In addition to these outcomes, the community has experienced benefits as well. The students in the IC have planned special events in conjunction with local agencies and organizations, ranging from an outdoor adventure experience for residents of a group home to a fund-raising "battle of the bands" to an art walk celebrating all ability levels at a downtown gallery. Beneficiaries of these events, which have, at times, raised over \$3,000 each, have included the Boys & Girls Club, Camp Kostopolous (a local camp for children with disabilities), SPLORE (an outdoor recreation agency for people with disabilities), and the Access Fund. These events have also led to increased participation in the department's internship program, serving both students and the organizations.

Finally, the University of Utah is currently engaging in a process of "re-imagining" undergraduate education, with specific attention paid to general education and baccalaureate requirements. The IC has earned the attention of the administration in undergraduate studies, and is informing models of delivery across the university. As a result, several faculty and courses from the PRT Department are involved in pilot efforts of block scheduling and integrated minors (integration of curricula across departments and colleges around an issue or problem).

### **Integrated Core: Challenges**

Beyond the demographic and institutional issues we identified previously, we can also identify with many of the challenges identified at the University of Georgia (see their earlier paper). These include inflexibility of the typical boundaries of university courses, student failure, developing a unified voice, and assessment strategies. In addition to these, we have identified the following unique challenges at the University of Utah.

#### **Developing a Consistent Voice**

Our experiences at the University of Utah add to Georgia's challenge of developing a *unified* voice the additional challenge of developing a *consistent* voice. Between years one and two of the IC, we experienced a change in two of the three faculty members leading the core. The initial lead faculty member (or "proctor") who was responsible for the oversight of the IC moved into an administrative position, and another faculty member was pulled into emphasis area courses. As such, a new proctor was assigned to the IC in July before a fall semester start. Reflecting upon this change in staffing, we realize that a consistent voice is integral to the success of the IC. Both students and faculty (including TAs) benefit from the familiarity and routine achieved after spending several years teaching in the IC. Because the IC is not like a traditional "classroom course," its delivery entails a significant amount of faculty training in order to grasp the flow of the curriculum, the team facilitation of large group simulation activities, and managing the logistics of the community engagement experiences. We recommend that faculty members be assigned to the IC for a minimum of three years and TAs for two years (with all members of the teaching team being physically present as often as possible) in order to create continuity and a similar sort of cohort relationship that we strive to create among our students.



### **Mentoring Graduate Students**

Each year, two or three new TAs join the IC as incoming doctoral students; some with prior teaching experience, some with none. Our traditional teaching path (prior to the IC) eased graduate students into the teaching process by having them serve more strictly as a teaching assistant (grading, delivering a few lectures, observing the classroom delivery, and weekly planning meetings with the instructor). This allowed for one-on-one mentoring between faculty and graduate students. In contrast in the IC, within the first two weeks of becoming a doctoral student, newly minted TAs are charged with leading their own discussion sections of 15-25 students. The intent of weekly IC team meetings was to allocate time to providing TAs with feedback and mentoring on their teaching. However, the logistics of a faculty member observing each TA teaching each week (by the numbers only: three faculty and five TAs) and having enough time in each week's meeting to dedicate one-on-one mentoring to each TA to understand teaching issues were problematic. A suggestion we have to mitigate this issue is to create a three-credit hour course focusing on teaching in higher education that is required for all incoming teaching assistants and is taken in conjunction with the IC.

### **TA/RA Balance**

At the University of Utah, doctoral students who receive funding are, technically, "graduate assistants." We, as a faculty, decided that these 20-hour/week appointments should afford both teaching and research opportunities. New doctoral students in the IC have all 20 hours assigned to that teaching responsibility, leaving them no research hours. Students in their second year of the IC were only assigned for 12 of their 20 hours, with the idea that they could work with a faculty member for eight hours of research and that they would not be required to attend the full lecture class of the IC. However, this led to these TAs missing out on classroom discussions and dynamics that should serve to inform their discussion sections. In addition, students in the IC noticed their absence, and this led to some confusion on the students' part. As such, we are struggling as a department to determine a sustainable model of assignments that serves TAs' teaching and research developmental needs.

### **Fidelity to the University's Requirements**

As mentioned previously, three of the courses in the IC (3310, 3320, and 3780) bear university designations as Diversity, Community Engaged Learning, and Quantitative Intensive courses. These courses are subject to review every three years by university committees. While these courses are included in the IC, they are also offered independently during other semesters, as well. This represents a logistical challenge with respect to maintaining and documenting fidelity to the requirements and expectations of these designations within both formats.

### **Conclusion**

The University of Utah is deeply committed to delivering its primary core courses via its Integrated Core. We believe this establishes the potential for impact in students with respect to active living, sustainability, and social justice as important issues in society. We also believe that the integration of content and opportunities for immediate application are the hallmarks of quality and relevant education. Beyond that, we believe

that predictable scheduling that allows for group work and community engagement better serves our unique, primarily commuter (for a number of reasons) students.

We also recognize a number of challenges to the delivery of our IC. In particular, we recognize the need to develop a sustainable model of staffing and mentorship. In light of changing times in higher education, where the emphasis is shifting to integration and increased relevance, we believe our model is consistent with these values. It is also an important point of visibility on our campus and, more importantly, a source of connection to our students. We truly believe that, upon completion, our students understand the potential impact their discipline and they, themselves, can have on our world. And, most importantly, we believe they feel inspired and empowered to make that impact.

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